



Relations between civilian and military officials: avoid the tile dog syndrome

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Published on 29/05/2018

Engagement opérationnel

The current debate on the place of the military in the interministerial dialogue raises the question of complementarity and mutual understanding between actors of different sensibilities and cultures. Optimising civil-military dialogue within the civil service will inevitably involve more reciprocal action in the fields of education on the one hand, and the sharing of responsibilities in operational situations on the other.

The current readjustment of responsibilities within the Ministry of Defence, aimed at strengthening the prerogatives granted to its senior officials, does not seem to leave the military community indifferent. Reacting to a current refocusing of responsibilities hitherto entrusted to the Chief of the Armed Forces Staff, a command he assumed from 2002 to 2006, Gen.ral Henri Bentégeat thus underlined the risks of a real "silent revolution", revealing a "distrust in principle of the loyalty of officers". 1) If the terms are provocative, they are nonetheless indicative of a potential malaise that deserves to be carefully considered. If there is distrust or mistrust between civilian and military actors within the Department of Defence, or the public service by extension, it is likely that it is rooted in a relative lack of understanding of each other. Even if the profound structural reforms carried out in France and the operational challenges taken up abroad have recently become more and more important, there is still a need to improve the quality and efficiency of the French defence system. The need for close dialogue, the risks of a shift in the mentalities and perceptions of civilian and military actors remain. The debate on the place of the military in interministerial dialogue raises the question of complementarity and mutual understanding between actors with different sensibilities and cultures. The optimisation of civil-military dialogue within the civil service will inevitably require more cross-cutting action in the fields of education on the one hand, and the sharing of responsibilities in operational situations on the other.

Meeting the educational challenge

Preparing the future French civilian and military elites to operate and decide together, with fluidity and synergy, is a crucial educational challenge. Far from being insurmountable, it requires a cross-disciplinary and progressive training programme in which officers and civil servants from various ministries learn to understand the cultural specificities of each. It is illusory, even naïve, to think that this understanding can be spontaneously instilled. At present, there are too few and too selective educational opportunities that mix officers with civil servants of equivalent rank from the defence and other regalian ministries (primarily foreign affairs, interior or justice). With a view to adjusting the training of young senior officers from the three armies and the gendarmerie to current and future operational challenges, the École de guerre would fully benefit from integrating several civilian civil service actors into its benches. The recent reorganization of the schooling makes this all the more easily possible since the joint phase has been reduced to six months, and would therefore constitute a less restrictive opportunity for civilian trainees. There is no need to underline the obvious added value of such an interministerial initiative which, on its own, could make it possible to confront in the long term and without superficiality the different actors destined to act together, both in France and in operations. And it is not the training provided by the Centre des Hautes Etudes Militaires (CHEM) in partnership with the civilian auditors of the Institut des Hautes Etudes de la Défense Nationale (IHEDN) that can suffice to feed this need for greater understanding and synergy between senior civil servants and military decision-makers. CHEM not only concentrates a particularly small population of officers, but also intervenes too late in the education cycle of officers.

Although there is room for improvement, the initiatives developed by our American counterparts on this subject deserve to be cited. The Command and General Staff College (CGSC) of the US Army, established at Fort Leavenworth (Kansas), the equivalent of our War College, has since 2006 systematically integrated a growing number of civilian agents from the Department of Defense, diplomats from the Department of State, as well as people from the Department of Homeland Security and various intelligence agencies. Interacting on a daily basis for ten months in a course combining operational planning, reflections on national strategic orientations and the application of interdepartmental crisis management mechanisms, young senior officers and American civilian actors develop a de facto high level of mutual understanding. In addition to mastering common working procedures, such integration ends up significantly erasing any asperities, feelings of mistrust or misperceptions that are still to some extent regrettable in France. And the American audacity in the field of civil acculturation of officers even goes beyond the public sphere to extend to the private domain, as in the case of several CGSC trainees seconded for most of their schooling to major companies such as General Electric, for example.

Operating and deciding together: the challenge of transversal integration

In addition to shared education at certain key stages of the career path, more cross-departmental assignments between different ministries would significantly reduce the risk of a "tile dog" syndrome developing between military and civilian decision-makers. The aim is to optimise the ability of senior officers and their main public service interlocutors to operate and decide together. External mobilities offered to military personnel in other ministries present valuable opportunities, but they remain too rare as they currently involve only a handful of officers each year. Significantly increasing the permeability of cross-cutting career paths between different line ministries would not only contribute to a better understanding of the military specificity within the public

debate, but would also meet a proven operational need for inter-ministerial synergy. Contemporary conflict management challenges highlight more than ever the need for any military leader to be much more than a mere "combat technician" and to distance himself more from his "core business", to use General Bentégeat's expressions.

Such a cross-cutting approach takes on greater prominence when it comes to working together in external operations. As a logical continuation of a broader integration of civil servants within our central headquarters, the permanent assignment of public civilian actors to the planning and conduct cells of our operations abroad would make sense. In particular, we should move beyond the current insufficient assignment of political advisors or other guarantors of the inter-ministerial approach. The complexity of contemporary operations to restore the social, political and economic balance of a failed country requires increasing understanding and interaction between field diplomats and officers. The aim is to be able to apply the diplomatic-military integration undertaken from Paris to the tactical levels of operational execution. The American example of the Foreign Area Officers can serve as a source of inspiration to enable this integration to be amplified. Benefiting from long and relatively exhaustive education and training cycles, these officers develop expertise by geographical area or thematic field, which most of them use in the context of long-term assignments in embassies.

This is no longer the time for "bickering" and mistrust between the military and the main public partners. This observation undoubtedly sounds obvious to everyone. But the reality is that it continues to manifest itself both in perceptions and in the fact that officers and their privileged partners in the public service lack valuable opportunities to be educated, trained and operate together. It is becoming essential to foster a new dynamic of joint education and cross-functional assignments between senior officers and senior public servants. The Ministry of Defence has the legitimacy to launch such an initiative that promotes the integration of the military decision-maker into the public landscape. But above all, it has the duty to do so. It is a matter of opening doors, not closing them. It is a question of proving the full extent of the military commander's capacity to exercise his responsibilities, whose vocation is not to be refocused. on his or her own core business as a combatant, but to be at the heart of the interdepartmental debate on national security and our international ambitions.

1) Army General (2S) Henri Bentégeat, "Métier des armes: une porte se fermeture", Le Figaro, 14 September 2013.

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Release date 08/01/2019